



## EPISODE 163: HOW TO WRITE A COMPELLING VILLAIN – WITH SACHA BLACK

Speaker 1: On this edition of The Self Publishing Show.

Sacha Black: Seeing aspects of ourselves, whether it's good aspects or bad aspects, even in the villain is relatable and readers connect with that and that's why it's so important.

Speaker 1: Publishing is changing, no more gatekeepers, no more barriers. No one standing between you and your readers. Do you want to make a living from your writing?

Join indie bestseller, Mark Dawson, and first time author James Blatch as they shine a light on the secrets of self-publishing success. This is The Self Publishing Show. There's never been a better time to be a writer.

James Blatch: Welcome to The Self Publishing Show. It's James Blatch.

Mark Dawson: And Mark Dawson.

James Blatch: We welcome you on a Friday to discuss everything that's essential in the world of the wannabe indie authors and the very successfully progressed indie authors.

**Mark Dawson: Yes, and first of all, Allan, who are we going to offend today? Or say, who are you going to offend today? Is it going to be Australians?**

James Blatch: I'm just going to generalize about everyone.

Mark Dawson: The Germans?



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James Blatch: No, I offended the Germans in the group today.

Yes, I've had a little bit of stick, because I used some, frankly, sloppy language to describe old people fiddling about with technology, and how we should be mindful of that when we send out links to our free books, et cetera.

I stand by the general gist of it, but I perhaps could have chosen my words more carefully. I think I refer to people in their 60s. I mean, I'm seven and a half years off being in my 60s now. But honestly, when I was criticizing old people, I thought, "Well, they won't hear it will they?"

Mark Dawson: Oh, God here we go.

James Blatch: Unless they got one of those trumpets to listen to.

Mark Dawson: That's it. Double down. Compound your error.

James Blatch: Somebody got very upset about it but yeah, there you go. I stand by the basic thing is we should make it as easy as possible for people to get our books and that's why we will talk about BookFunnel specifically at that point, which we thoroughly recommend as a service.

Frankly I look after my parents-in-law, my father, a few other people who don't find technology as easy as younger people do now. As a generalism but in general I just try.

Mark Dawson: Let me dig you out of the hole you're scrambling to dig us out off. Basically, the gist is we need to make it as easy as possible for everyone. It doesn't matter if they are 25 or 65.

James Blatch: Inclusive.

Mark Dawson: Before we lose all of our subscribers because James has annoyed them all, I'm going to be the common rational voice of reason in today's podcast. James is going to be an inpatient.



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James Blatch: I could be the mad conspiracy theorist and you could be the calm voice of reason.

Mark Dawson: Well, let's not change our usual roles. It's kind of how it is.

James Blatch: Anyway, this highly professional podcast which is very, sensitive to everybody in all sections of the community, if you'd like to support us in our indie is not to-

Mark Dawson: This is going to work.

James Blatch: Not to offend people, we love to have your support so thank you so much indeed if you've been to [patreon.com/selfpublishingshow](https://patreon.com/selfpublishingshow) and

I want to give a special shout-out welcome to our newer subscribers this week. We got Doreen Strydom. Doreen lives in Cavan in Ireland. Welcome Doreen and Dominic, and I'm not 100% on this surname at all. It's sort of spelt Saccido. Dominic Saccido but it might be Saccido maybe. He lives in Minneapolis.

Mark Dawson: Saccido?

James Blatch: Saccido. For Connor's reference, how old are you?

Mark Dawson: There we go again. If you need any help with your tech, let me know. Dominic, thank you very much from Minneapolis, Minnesota over there in Prince Country.

James Blatch: Thank you indeed. You can join Dominic and Doreen and get your own shout-out on The Self Publishing Show if you go to [patreon.com/spf-podcast](https://patreon.com/spf-podcast).

Another thing to mention Mark, is at the moment we are in the middle of an open period for people to enroll into Self-Publishing 101.



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Mark Dawson: We are, yes. We opened, as we record this on Friday the 8th of March. We opened on Wednesday and as usual I have absolutely no idea how well these things are going to go and we were delighted. It's been really, really busy.

We've had several hundred authors have signed up and are currently going through the content, has some really lovely messages from other groups.

Craig Martelle posted into 20Books Group and then loads and loads of students fed back their experience with the course into that group. Adam Croft posted into his Facebook group this morning, lots of people are spreading the word.

In our own community someone asked for advice as to whether the course is right for them and I very deliberately step back and let other people answer because it's not always me to reference everybody and that person had 20 or 25 people feeding back why they thought it was a good idea to sign up.

So it's really lovely to see that and that's a course I'm very fond of as a foundation course to help people get started and it's almost certain that some of those people who have signed up this week in a year's time, might be like Jason looking back on six figures in their first 10 months, who knows. Certainly fingers crossed that we get a few people like that.

James Blatch: The really exciting thing is that I get a discount code because I can start doing it soon.

Mark Dawson: No, you're paying full price.

James Blatch: You're so mean. Just because I'm in my 50s. Yes. Now, one thing you haven't said is where to go if you want to learn more about one course-



Mark Dawson: You didn't give me a chance.

You insulted me before I got the chance to say the URL. I'll do it. It's [selfpublishinformula.com/101](http://selfpublishinformula.com/101). 1-0-1. That will take you to the sales page where there's lots of information, testimonials there's a walkthrough video and datas of the bonuses and the course curriculum. Everything you need is there.

There's also a chat box so you can hit live chats and you'll get one of us. If you get James sorry about that, don't be old please. It will be an unpleasant experience for you. But you might get John. John is lovely and will make you feel-

James Blatch: He's competent.

Mark Dawson: Yes, he'll make you warm and fluffy and cultured. He's completely age blind whereas James, of course, is not.

James Blatch: Yes, I'll dismiss you straight. I'll ask your age as soon as you come on and I'm afraid if you're in your 60s you're out and that's as simple as that. There's just no point.

I tell you about the chat thing is fun. I was thinking about this yesterday morning, it was breakfast time, I think I had a dental appointments so I had to get out of the house quite quickly and I had a quite complicated chat. I was in the middle of this guy who was in the states, his credit card for whatever reason just wasn't working and we couldn't really fathom how we're going to all the processes and I was thinking how brilliant it is the way businesses run today.

You're with your friends, you start up this business and before you know it, you find yourself in a call center. Like you're working in a call center, doing live chat helping people do things online et cetera and it was unthinkable for years. Today we can start our own businesses and run them like really good professional businesses.



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Mark Dawson: Well, in theory that's what we can do.

James Blatch: We are doing that. I love it. I love the variety of it. I love being on the end of the chat and people are sometimes surprised and they say, "Oh my goodness. Are you from the podcast?"

Mark Dawson: I haven't done any live chats this time but a couple of times last time for ads they realized it was me and one person was kind of fumbling a bit which was I still find that absolutely ridiculous but anyway, it's very flattering.

James Blatch: I bet people don't believe it's you. They say, "Is this really Mark Dawson?"

Mark Dawson: It's John Dyer pretending to be me.

James Blatch: Yeah. Again, it does that with your credit card. Yeah, I think you've got about a week left or so to sign up for the 101 course. We are doing a webinar, are we not? We're doing a webinar on how to get reviews, which is a bit of a chicken and egg situation, isn't it for authors starting out?

It's also a bit of a minefield because there's strict rules about what you can and can't do so you've devised a comprehensive webinar, it's an hour and a half or so, live with you and me to give some tips and strategies on how to get your first reviews.

Mark Dawson: It's a tricky situation getting reviews. It is as you said, chicken and egg question because I remember when I started I wasn't selling any books so I couldn't get any reviews but I thought I needed the reviews to sell the books and it was one of those things I couldn't quite wrap my head around but I've kind of nailed it now.

I don't have a problem with getting reviews good and bad, I get plenty of either.



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The webinar will look at I think it's about 10 strategies that you will leave with the means to get reviews for your books as a starting author with perhaps minimal sales behind you. I will show you how to start the ball rolling on that.

James Blatch: Okay, and the webinar course is completely free of charge. If you'd like to attend the webinar live, if you go to [selfpublishingformula.com/bookreviews](http://selfpublishingformula.com/bookreviews), all one word, bookreviews, you can run just-

Mark Dawson: The webinar is on Monday the 18th of March at 9:00 UK time. I know we're straddling a time zone shift in the US at the moment so I have absolutely no idea what time it will be wherever you are in the world but it'll be on the website, you can work it out.

James Blatch: Yeah and once you've signed up, you'll get the time in your locality. I think we'll email to you.

We should say that last time we did a similar webinar it was oversubscribed and people were turned away. Get there early to play.

Mark Dawson: That's not marketing bs either. You'll see somebody will say "Oh, yes. Place is strictly limited." Well, places are limited.

I think we've got 500 maximum on our webinars and I think we probably could have done that twice. Last time it was really surprising. We may look at increasing the capacity if that happens again but to be sure that you're going to get in just sign up soon.

James Blatch: Talk to the CFO before you increase that subscription. It's expensive.

Mark Dawson: Yes, it is expensive.

James Blatch: But yes get there early and we look forward to it. It'd be like the podcast live The Self Publishing Show live.



**Now, we also have the SPF University. How would you become a member of the SPF University, Mark? What are the entry qualifications?**

Mark Dawson: Well, if you are a member of any of the courses, so anyone who signed up for the 101 course will be able to get these monthly webinars that we do. Try to do them monthly when we can.

Same goes for Ads for Authors students, they'll get invited as well and also if you're Patreon subscriber you'll also get an invitation. We've got a good one on the Wednesday the 20th, I think, with Alex Newton from K-lytics.

I don't think he quite grasped you're really dreadful joke about ducks and the last part was very ... Actually just listen to it as it went out live this morning.

For those who haven't listened to it yet, Alex makes a witty and erudite comment about small niches on Amazon and the example he uses is there is a nature park for people who make wooden decoys for duck hunting. James, he was not witty or erudite, quipped that you'd have to be quackers to write a book in that notion. I don't know. I think Alex actually probably did get it. He was just much too polite to call you up on a really terrible joke.

James Blatch: Yeah, and someone was rude about the Germans and their sense of humor and I've had a beer with Alex and I can tell he's got a fantastic sense of humor. He is a lovely guy.

Okay, that's on March the 20. That webinar is for members of the SPF University. They will get an email out, telling them how to sign up and how to get to it and it gets popped in the courses area once you are online so if you ... It's just one of the bonuses of being a member of the 101 course and the Facebook groups, et cetera.





Okay. Mark, now we are going to talk about Tommy Donvaband who we are spoken about before. We follow Tommy's fight against cancer.

Tommy is the brilliant writer of a great children's books my son is now chomping through. *Scream Street*, I think is the series. Tommy was dealt just the worst possible news very recently after fighting his cancer of the throat for so long that he's been served notice now that it's incurable now.

He's coming to terms with that and he's been very brutally honest in his blog, which is a wonderful and inspiring thing to read and our hearts go out to Tommy. This is a desperate time for his family, of course, and we're doing what we can.

There's been a Just Giving page, a fundraising page for him, but we've got an idea to raise a little bit more money for Tommy's family at this most desperate for them.

Mark Dawson: We do, yeah.

One of Tommy's best friends is another writer called Barry Hutchinson who lives in Scotland and I think I may be meeting Barry next week. Probably met him at 20Books London as well but I think he's going to LBF.

He made me aware of an auction that's been set up for Tommy whereby people are giving away things in exchange for people who bid the highest will get those things and I think he's got things like something from Paul McCartney is in there, some writers were involved, we have some Doctor Who stuff, Tony's written Dr. Who before, so lots of cool stuff.

It got me thinking what could we give away and the thing I'm been thinking about is the Book Lab. Book Lab is for Patreon subscribers and if you don't know, they're one of the most popular podcasts that we do.

We'll take someone's book and we look at the cover, the blurb, the sales page and the writing and the look inside and we'll offer constructive



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criticism on how all of those elements can be improved. It's real industry experts; Stuart Bache, Bryan Cohen, Jennie Nash and I'll chip in occasionally as well. It's quite a valuable thing to have. It would cost quite a long way to have those things done.

I thought, well, why don't we open it? For this time only will open it up more widely to the whole SPF community and the community beyond that.

It's a valuable prize and we're going to auction that off. I think also, we don't normally include a new cover. You would always get a new blurb that you could test with what Bryan Cohen put together but I think this time we'll also throw in a new cover. Either Stuart will cover that or we'll pay for that.

You'll get a new cover for your book as well you can start to work with. I may actually take whatever we get in the auction and double that so I might do that as well.

It's a good reason to help out someone who needs a bit of help and it's also a very valuable prize as well in terms of your career. What URL are we going to use for this?

James Blatch: If we give people this URL, [selfpublishingformula.com/Tommy](https://selfpublishingformula.com/Tommy) and then we'll set up a redirect to go to the actual auction site from there. Yeah, [selfpublishingformula.com/Tommy](https://selfpublishingformula.com/Tommy) and your chance to bid on that.

That's open to everybody, not just Patreon supporters to bid on the chance to be the recipient of three fantastic critiques of your book, your cover and your blurb and your book. Then as Mark says, you'll also get a new cover out of it.

Mark Dawson: We should probably start the bidding about 500 quid I would have thought. Let's see where we go. That seems reasonable to me.



It'd be great to give Tommy and his family a little bit more to help them through very, very difficult time so let's all get stuck in.

James Blatch: Now we are going to get to our podcast interview today. Our featured interview today is all about creating the perfect villain and we talked about heroes as well, actually, and there's a fantastic handout to go with this episode, which I'm going to talk about in a moment but we've got one more subject to cover before we get to our interviewee.

We talked about some Germans earlier. We're now talking about Germans reading your books, Mark.

Mark Dawson: I think we'll cover this another time I think just a quick snippet of what we might cover in the future.

I've had three books translated into German and I posted into the SPF group the slightly sobering, slightly serving screen grab of those books with telephone number ranks, which is not saying that I've had to worry about for a few years, but those books even in a smaller German market compared to the UK.

And the US have just plunged into the 20,000, 25,000 range with no promotion. There were just put out there, there was no promotion, no mailing lists, none of the things I normally do affected that at all.

That was a good demonstration of what happens if you don't promote your books even with with me, with reasonably well known name and a series that could be a TV show next year, those books just sank without a trace.

Over the last couple of weeks things have changed and we can look at that in perhaps in a bit more detail later but there now they're making 50 or 60 Euros a day now. I'm in the red to the tune of about €16,000 or €17,000 so I've got a long way to go before I've started to make profit on those books but they are moving in the right direction.



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James Blatch: I think that might be a dedicated episode on translation. We can try and perhaps to go and interviewee as well. I'd like to know how you got to that spend level broken down a little bit to understand that so yeah, let's do that, let's do that in the near future.

Now, moving on to the featured interview and it is with Sacha Black this week and this is an SPF moment because Sacha first came to our attention when she bought into the 101 course. I think maybe the second release of the 101 course when she came down to London to talk to us about that and she was starting out.

We could tell straight away this is somebody immersed in her genre, very enthusiastic writer and very dedicated to it. She was working I think in local government at the time we wanted, obviously, to make the transition to being a full-time writer and she's been a very keen supporter of you mark and of the 101 course.

I checked with her at the beginning of this interview which was recorded a month or so ago, and she said she still hadn't quite made the transition to cut her hours down, but she's announced this week, appositely, that she has actually quit her job and is now a full-time writer. Congratulations, Sacha.

She emailed me this week just to say again about your course so I'm just going to blow our own trumpet and your trumpet a little bit and just to quote Sacha-

Mark Dawson: You can't blow much of anything actually.

James Blatch: Just to quote Sacha from her email this week on her move to being a full-time writer. She said, "There are a million author courses out there, but none help to fulfill as many author dreams as Mark Dawson's. If you want to know how credible a course really is, look at the quality of their alumni. I took Mark's course and it was instrumental in helping shape my



business mindset and now I'm joining the alumni who have made it to full-time writing."

Thank you very much indeed, Sacha. She has become an expert in this area. She's very keen that villains and heroes are rounded, credible, flawed characters and not one dimensional, because that's what makes your book a better book and stands out makes the reader want to turn the page and she's become a little bit of a guru in this area.

She teaches on this, she writes on this, and it's a great interview on the subject and it comes with a brilliant I think, 17 or pages worth of instruction and tips on how to create and craft your perfect villain.

You can get the PDF if you go to [selfpublishingshow/villains](http://selfpublishingshow/villains).  
[Selfpublishingshow/villains](http://Selfpublishingshow/villains).

### **Do they spell villains the same in the US as we do with an AI in the middle of it? I think so?**

Mark Dawson: Yes.

James Blatch: I always spell villains with an A, yeah. That's really, really worth having so I'd recommend you go and get that. Right. With no more further ado, it's been a mammoth introduction. But we're here at the meet of The Self Publishing Show's episode this week. Let's talk to Sacha Black.

James Blatch: Sacha Black, welcome to The Self Publishing Show. I hope the edit will come in just as I say, Sacha Black and not when you said I'm so nervous I'm going to vomit on the mic a fraction before then.

Sacha Black: I really hate to say too, but thanks for sharing.

James Blatch: We share everything on The Self Publishing Show. Look, it's brilliant to have you on. We've known each other a couple years now.



Sacha Black: We have. We met at the London Book Fair I think couple of years ago.

James Blatch: Yes, and people might remember that we got drunk and you made me shake your hand and promise my book is going to be out by this London Book Fair.

Sacha Black: I did and I will not let you forget.

**James Blatch: What's at stake, I can't remember? Did we say what was at stake? Is it the beer?**

Sacha Black: Honestly, it's probably beer and gin so I don't think the stakes are too high here but still public pressure.

James Blatch: Public pressure that's what we need. Okay. Well, look you're here, we should say that you have, in the time that I have known you, you've gone from one of the author to published author and are you living off your writing income now?

Sacha Black: Not quite.

James Blatch: Okay.

Sacha Black: But I have started to reduce my hours at the corporate rat race and again I'll be reducing more hours in April so it is coming down quite rapidly now but not quite full-time.

James Blatch: Okay, well that's definitely on the horizon for you which has been she's very exciting, we should celebrate that moment regardless of my own part.

Sacha Black: There will be a huge party.

James Blatch: Yes. Which is great. You've become very interested in a specialist area, which is the layered complexities of a character. Not the one



dimensional character, but how you create a compelling character about the hero and the villain.

**You've written two books on the subject, one dedicated to each of those.**

Sacha Black: I've blogged for a really long time and I started blogging just to record my own journey. I wanted somewhere to write down the lessons that I was learning because I'm really obsessed with words and learning and development.

I just wanted somewhere to put them down and I started sharing them and I wrote, I think, sort of five posts about villains. Some of them were quite ranty, sort of about cliches and how there weren't many female villains and they went not viral but I had tens of thousands of views in a very short amount of time.

I kind decided there was probably a market there. I did some research on Amazon, had a look to see what craft books there were, there wasn't one particularly on villains or there was sort of one or two, but not many. It just spiraled from there really, and I just compiled the lessons.

You can't really turn blogs into a book, it's a very different structure but it ballooned from there and once I finished villains, it felt very natural then to go on to do one on heroes.

**James Blatch: Should we start with villains? Everyone loves a baddie, right?**

Sacha Black: Absolutely.

James Blatch: How do we approach this because everybody has probably a fairly simplistic idea in their mind about their baddie and the bad things they're going to do but good novels have more complicated characters than that, don't they?



Sacha Black: Absolutely. I think one of the most difficult parts about writing a villain is the lack of page time. The majority of your book, unless it's written from multiple points of view, it is from the hero's point of view.

You've got a 100,000 words and probably only 10,000 or 15,000 of those where the villain may or may not show up and if you're writing a mystery, then actually the villain quite often doesn't appear until right at the end.

That's one of the hardest parts of creating a villain. The other hard part is that is as writers, we are obsessed with our heroes. That's who we're writing through the eyes of, we fall in love with them.

**James Blatch: It's who we want to be.**

Sacha Black: Exactly. Well, it is really. Obviously, we all want magical powers or is that just me?

We don't spend much time on them. Things that we typically don't do, we don't give them a proper motivation, we don't give them a redeeming quality so that is a classic mistake, a villain with no likable trait.

Even villains like Lord Voldemort, they have Nagini, which is a pet snake and he's sort of nice to his pet snake. Not giving a villain a redeeming quality, that's a classic error, using cliches, typical traps that we fall into.

Very, very hard to create a good villain but if you do, I personally think it's one of the things that hooks a reader and gives the reader the content word, that urge to turn the page because they're the source of conflict.

James Blatch: We had a little chat about my writing before we started recording. One of the things I'm discovering because the coach I'm working closely with notices. Whenever I have a character, let's say he's the villain in my case, and he does something nice or he's conflicted about whether he should do some ... She loves it.





As an editor she said this is the conflict makes the character come alive. Of course, that's not intuitive particularly to first time novelist. You want your baddie to be bad and it's quite counterintuitive to have them portraying them in a sympathetic, struggling with the reality of what they've got to do.

**But of course, that makes them a human an interesting character.**

Sacha Black: Absolutely. It does make them human and I think that's what readers connect with because I think literature as a whole is often a reflection of humanity and even back in the sort of caveman days, they were telling stories.

That's how we inherited our knowledge and we learn from it, we reflect on ourselves on it and seeing aspects of ourselves whether it's good aspects or bad aspects even in the villain is relatable and readers connect with that and that's why it's so important.

James Blatch: If you do write your villain as a sociopathic serial killer without any other attributes, the only person that's going to connect with is another sociopathic serial killer and there's a limited number of those I think buying books today.

**Sacha Black: You say that, but look at Dexter. Have you seen the TV series, Dexter?**

James Blatch: Yes, I have.

Sacha Black: For people who haven't, Dexter is a psychopath but he has morals and this is where you can layer complexity into a villain. He works for the Miami, I think it's Miami Police Department and he's a blood spatter analyst and he kills people that the police fail to apprehend.

Now, your moral judgment there you would think that that would be a bad thing because he's killing people but the way that I think it's Jeff Lindsay or



Lindsay something that the author and plays it is kind of as a philosophical question: where is your moral line?

Dexter is killing only people that adhere to a particular code of the bad things that he's done and that makes him relatable because he adheres to his values. His moral code is his value so he wouldn't kill a woman, he wouldn't kill a child. Even there, even somebody who's a psychopath can still have that connecting inner value of goodness.

James Blatch: Yes. I completely see that. Dex is also nice guy which makes that interesting watching. I do remember at the PBFC, Mark and I and John met. We watched lots of episodes of Dexter classifying them for DVD in the UK and then they did some work on the building and then the lift was a very oak panel beautiful lift and they covered it in all this plastic sheeting to protect it. We stood in the lift and someone said to me, "I think we're in Dexter's killing room."

Sacha Black: Yes.

James Blatch: He has his killing area because he knows about blood spatter and how to deal with it. It's a good series.

Sacha Black: Absolutely.

James Blatch: As you said, as you mentioned a TV episodes, films and TV are great examples of characters to talk about.

My editor often says watch this film and talk about it, rather than read this book as you can do it more quickly and discuss the characters.

**The one that always comes to mind when we talk about villains for me is Breaking Bad where there are some pretty straightforward villains in there but the main character in Breaking Bad I think even after all the episodes it's quite difficult to say he's ultimately the baddie or ultimately the hero and that complexity was compelling and gripping.**



Maybe towards the end, I don't want to give it away for people. You can't take a side.

Sacha Black: I think he's an antihero. It's kind of a hybrid.

Antiheroes and have all of the traits of a bad guy so they might be arrogant, they might kill people for their own benefit they might steal but they also have inner quality qualities that are good, and they tend save the day.

Deadpool, is a great example of an antihero. Also Beetlejuice that classic character. In the end they save the day.

They are a hero but they return to their typical bad behaviors. Their character arc is flat in the sense that a hero will overcome his flaw, the antihero is defined by his flaw and he doesn't get better, he just makes different decisions. I think it's both ways isn't it for Walter White?

James Blatch: It is both way, yeah.

Sacha Black: Yeah, and I think he's probably an antihero.

James Blatch: Yes. Like Alan Partridge is also an antihero. Great comedy character in the UK we mention on every podcast episode.

Are there certain genres that do heroes better than that? I'm thinking if you're writing a literary fiction book. It always sounds a bit snobbish and highfalutin but if you're writing literary fiction book, you are probably going to think about this stuff a lot more than if you're writing maybe a fantasy YA novel and you've got your arc story of magic.

Mark's genres are thrillers where there's a story lead type thing. Maybe these are the books where people need to take a step back and start adding in.

**Do you find the genre novels are the ones where people aren't working as hard at layering the characters?**



Sacha Black: No, not necessarily. Well, I don't necessarily read an awful lot of literary fiction but to me, it's more about the message and the language and the portrayal that you're doing with genre fiction.

I actually think they are quite character driven but you could find different types of character arc. Typically you have three; you have a positive character arc, where a hero will start out flawed and then by the end of the novel, they will be not flawed. They'll have overcome it through or fighting through all the obstacles in your plot.

You have a flat character arc, which is where your main character doesn't change at all. Quite often you see that in detective novels and thrillers possibly. Katniss from The Hunger Games has a flat character arc. She's very good, sacrifices herself throughout.

And then you have a negative arc where you'll have a character who starts out good gets led down a dark path and ends up in not so good of a place.

I think actually it depends on the type of series that, like I said, thrillers, mystery detectives, you'll often see flat characters but the change that you'll see in the story because the story is changing so you have to have a change whether it be the character arc or something else, the change typically with the characters is where there's a flat arc is usually in the world so the hero will be affecting that change on the world.

Katniss in The Hunger Games, basically takes down the kind of bad society, The Capital-

James Blatch: You spoiled it. Does she take it down in the end? I thought the Capital won? Anyway, go on.

Sacha Black: Well, I would like to watch from wherever she wins but no. Yeah, so she she wins and she effects change on the world as opposed to her changing as a person.



James Blatch: Okay. If you're going to have this this character arc which will involve conflicts because if you're flat then maybe you're not conflicted, you're the one who always said, this is how we're going to do it.

Darth Vader, I guess, is a good example of a baddie although it happens quite late to him. He does go through a transformation. That happens quite late in the story. Darth Vader's an example, maybe if you were to write that type of film, but make it better ...

A really arrogant thing say about the biggest selling franchise in the world ever that I adore but if you're going to critique that you might say, well, why don't you introduce some of that conflict and Vader a little lot earlier on in the story?

**You presumably want this to help drive the story, this change in the character not so suddenly at the end, "You're right. I could have been good all along."**

Sacha Black: Absolutely. In my latest book about heroes, I talked about the web of connectivity, and that's how every aspect of your novel needs to be connected.

I studied psychology at the university and there's a principle called the Gestalt principle, which is this kind of a queer phrase. The whole is more than the sum of its parts and that, to me, is what a book is and the hero is kind of at the core of that web.

The theme, the obstacles, the wound, which I'll just elaborate on in a second, all of these things need to be introduced earlier on and they flow together within a kind of a golden thread that comes together in the climax and the kind of resolution of the story. I think the question was, do you have to introduce them early on? Was that the question?

James Blatch: Yeah, so you can't basically have somebody who just at the end says, "I've redeemed myself on the last page."



**It's much more interesting and better for the story if a story is driven by that change.**

Sacha Black: Absolutely. For example, the hero and the villain should have something in their past so prior to the novel that creates a flaw in them, whether it be something happened to a detective and they're a drinker now, or Katniss ... I can't remember actually if this is true but a character, a hero lost a parent, and therefore they're overly protective of their sibling, and Katniss is protective of her sibling and that's why she sacrifices.

All of these aspects have to be connected and the wound particularly in the hero's past, and even the villain's past needs to be driving their behavior in the current.

Each of your plot obstacles needs to test that flaw and that's how you get to the resolution at the end, that kind of big climax. Does that make sense?

James Blatch: Clever. Yes, it does make sense. That chips away their flaw.

Sacha Black: Absolutely.

James Blatch: I like that. I should be making notes.

Should we talk a little bit more about heroes? We talked about villains quite a lot. You've mentioned your hero book as well. It's interesting to me that you did them separately as well.

**Are there significant differences because some of it has got to be an overlap?**

Sacha Black: There are some overlaps. Classic things like traits, motivations, both both heroes and villains need those. There's probably two major differences.

In the villain's book, I have an entire chapter on mental health because villains are quite often stigmatized and characterized as having a mental



health. You often have psychopath, sociopath, you often have female villains as being characterized with borderline personality disorder.

Obviously, having a background in psychology is quite important to me that it's fine if a writer wants to characterize a villain as having these disorders, but not taking into consideration the impact in doing the research properly, you can end up stigmatizing a kind of set for society.

I worked with some of my friends who are now clinical psychologists. I had all my chapters thoroughly checked, but I work to destigmatize that, to put the true symptoms. That's one of the key things that's in the villains that isn't in the hero's book.

The key thing that's in the hero's book that's perhaps not in the villain's book is the hero lens. Your book, when you write your story is told through the eyes of your hero. The hero lens is basically the funnel through which your story is told, and through which your reader experiences your story.

Now typically, writers worry about traits and motivations but every human on the planet has traits and everybody has a motivation. That's not what's unique about your hero, what's unique about your hero is how they react to their motivations, how they embody their traits. Let me ask you a question. Is turquoise more blue or more green?

James Blatch: Blue.

Sacha Black: Okay. I bet you half of the listeners said-

James Blatch: I have no idea, yeah. It's really soon, yeah.

Sacha Black: But that's the point.

James Blatch: Okay.



Sacha Black: How you see turquoise and how I see turquoise is slightly different. That's what you have to capture with your hero, that's what's unique.

Thor and Loki in the Marvel movies have the same motivation. They both want the crown of Asgard but they react to that challenge differently.

Loki ends up going down this dark antihero villainous path, whereas Thor embodies being a leader and sacrificing and so the way that he will sense and feel and smell things will smell differently to the way that Loki does it.

That is ensuring that you imbue your descriptions in your story with those nuances is how you create a unique hero. That's one of the chapters.

**James Blatch: There's quite a lot to think about, isn't there to get this right?**

Sacha Black: Yes, there is a lot to think about.

James Blatch: People come up with their stories in different ways and very often it is not the character in their minds of the bigger ... It's certainly true for me. I think of stories, which is a problem for me because I think of something that happened, something that triggers something else and where it's going to end up.

Then after that, I start to think about the character journey, but actually, probably a good way of doing this is to think about this character, think about their flaws and then what series, events would prod that flaw, would push that wound and would make that character change? That's a really brilliant way of coming up with original stories, I think. I think I just invented this.

Sacha Black: Absolutely. Villains, typically, they'll have like a complex. It might be that they have an inferiority complex and that, in their past, will be developed by repeated exposure to failure, for example or people who are





in the senior position to them, making them feel inferior. It's an inferiority complex. But that's important.

It's the sustained exposure to these things so in the hero, it's the sustained exposure to obstacles that test their flaw and make them realize that they want to overcome it more and more and more and obviously having something taken away or a sacrifice because that's what readers connect with is the the sacrifice that heroes make. Not being brave.

James Blatch: Okay. Just explain that.

Sacha Black: Lots of writers think that your hero needs to be brave and often they are brave but that anybody can be brave.

Sacrificing something, usually the part of themselves that's flawed so they have to give up something whether it be a fear and learn internal fear or whether it be a crown in order to save his people instead of being king. It's the sacrificing of something that makes readers feel empathy and connect with the hero rather than them just doing an act of bravery.

James Blatch: Like the moment in Cyrano de Bergerac, one of my favorite lines where he basically agrees to set the girl up. Then she talks about his sword fighting and says you've been very brave and he says, "I've been brave since," and she doesn't know what he's talking about but he's obviously realized his place in the world is not going to be with her. Sacrifice.

Sacha Black: Yeah.

James Blatch: I remember that from years ago, that stands out with you from the characters point of view so that does make sense.

I'm thinking through as you're talking about heroes and villains. Probably there are more villains you can easily name and we can talk about serial



killers like Jeffrey Dahmer and ultimately, Hitler, I guess most people would say is the ultimate villain.

Heroes, I think are slightly more complex in my mind because most heroes you'll name someone. Nelson Mandela in his day was controversial, not many people would probably say controversial things about him today but he's had that complex life. There's not many people you're going to meet who are going to say, "Hitler's misunderstood."

We do probably see villains one dimension but the way you're talking about, even Adolf Hitler was a little boy at some point and something happened. A series of things happen to him along the way to end up as this monster by the 1940s.

**The more we understand about that, the better writers we're going to be about real characters.**

Sacha Black: Absolutely. There's that really famous cheesy phrase that, "Even villains have mummies." Well, I do kind of love it because it's true.

James Blatch: Yeah, it is true isn't it? But heroes, it's funny just thinking that through out loud. The heroes we can mention trying to think of some other.

**Who are our heroes today, Sacha? Who are our heroes?**

Sacha Black: Oh, my goodness. I feared you were going to ask me. Well, like literary hero or kind of superhero?

I love Batman. I love antiheroes. I don't really like the knight in shining armor with gloriously, rippling torsos. I much prefer the more real reflection of humanity. That's why I like antiheroes because they are a reflection of humanity. They get to do all of the things that we secretly want to do and can't actually do. Your Deadpools and Beetlejuice. They're my kind of heroes.

**James Blatch: And who you are your villains?**



Sacha Black: Well, similarly they are half and half but with villains I suppose I ... I don't think I have a favorite but I like different aspects of different villains.

For example in The Matrix I really like Agent Smith's monologue. He has this quite famous monologue where he talked about humanity and how we're like a virus upon the earth. It's kind of true and if you, as a writer, can get the audience to agree with your villain's "crazy" as I like to call it, that kind of world domination plans even for a second, you've smashed it as far as I'm concerned.

You can do that by letting them have integrity, getting them to stick to what they say they're going to do no matter what, letting them have a value.

Lots of people only give their heroes values but actually villains need values as well as morals, things that they value whether it be loyalty or or justice and then pervert that sense of justice and unyielding logic because that's what makes Agent Smith's monologue brilliant.

James Blatch: Do you know what pops into my head as you're saying that is in some comedies I like as well, where you have an antihero, The Office example with David Brent, and Curb Your Enthusiasm with Larry David. Both those characters work, I think, because quite often they're sort of right.

Because bits of what they do, particularly Larry David where you think he's gone about it in a really candid way and he's saying things cringe worthy. But he's right about what he's doing and that's probably the same sort of thing that's going on here with the villains, part of you thinking what humankind is bacteria on the planet in one way of looking at it.

I'm not sure I'd necessarily wipe it out as a result of that but that's just the choice he's making. We need to respect each other's choices.

Sacha Black: Yeah. Exactly.



**James Blatch: Tell me about the books themselves, how are they structured and how should people use them is this something you sit down, read through, or do you make notes or do you the exercises?**

Sacha Black: I have a textbook and a workbook. The workbook has summaries of each chapter and then questions and exercises and space for most of them.

Some of them require paragraphs of exercises, but that's the workbooks and then in the textbooks, I have written them so that you can pick and choose so you can use them like a reference.

Just say you wanted to learn about creating fear you could just go to a fear chapter, if you wanted to learn about motivation you could go to that chapter.

But most people tend to read them front to back. I've structured them so they are ground up so you start with the basics, personality traits, go to history, motivations, gesturing.

James Blatch: Keep going on. Or not.

Sacha Black: I can open up to the pinnacle of a villain. Yeah. It's the same for the hero. I've structured them from the ground up.

**James Blatch: These work across genres presumably; heroes and villains in every genre.**

Sacha Black: Yes, I do make a point of saying I'm not a literary writer, I'm not a horror writer, don't go to my villains book expecting to write amazing horror.

This is looking at characterization and how you can create a better character and characters are in all genres. Yes, they are across genre.



I also have examples from TV film, possibly theater, I can't quite remember. I've tried to make them as broad brush view as possible.

**James Blatch: Brilliant. Now, I think you've got a giveaway for us?**

Sacha Black: Yeah, I've got a kind of a quick cheat sheet guide to ... I say quick. It's probably about 15, 17 pages, something like that but it's a mini summary of the book so it will help you do the basics for creating your villain.

James Blatch: This is about creating a villain? I'd say a shortcut but 17 pages is a substantial shortcut, but substantial and I think it worked.

Sacha Black: I think there might be questions. It's not all dense text. There are helpful questions and things to make you think.

**James Blatch: If people want to go on and purchase the books, where can they find them?**

Sacha Black: All good bookstores. I am wide and I have paperbacks and eBooks and all of that malarkey. Amazon, Kobo Apple, all of those wonderful places.

You can visit me on [www.sachablack.co.uk](http://www.sachablack.co.uk). That's Sacha with a C in the middle not an S and I'm on Twitter, Instagram I think Sacha Black warfare and all sort of Sacha black on all of the Facebook's and social medias. Yeah.

James Blatch: Sacha it's always a pleasure talking to you and I can't wait for London Book Fair to share a couple of beers with you as I hand over my book to you.

Sacha Black: Absolutely. I tell you it will be the best handshake I've ever given you and I will chuck four pints your way if I need to if that's encouragement you need to finish it.



James Blatch: I'll need them, I'll need them. I talked to you about my book earlier, I'm going to do an update on the podcast the week after we're recording this but it'd be longer months on this broadcast. Brilliant. Such fun and good luck with your career, Sacha.

Sacha Black: Thank you.

James Blatch: We're looking forward to you making that final transition at running down those hours at the local council, I think it worked out.

Sacha Black: I did, yes. Local government for my sins.

James Blatch: Give them the boot and it'll be the all new Sacha Black; the complex, multi-layered villain/antihero.

Sacha Black: Thank you so much for having me, it's been an absolute honor.

James Blatch: There we go, Mark. You have a few baddies in your book, John Milton. Although Milton himself is a flawed character but he comes across on the baddies.

**Do you put as much thought as you think you should into making sure the baddies are not just one dimensional?**

Mark Dawson: Yeah, I try to. I actually asked my facebook group a while ago for favorite characters and one of the bad guys came up more than once which I wasn't that surprised about because there's one in particular an Ex-Mossad agent who has crossed Milton's path a few times and he's harder than Milton is so there's a few spare couple of scraps and Milton basically gets his backside handed to him by this guy.

He was very popular because there's a reason why he behaves the way he does towards Milton saying that Milton did in his backstory. Yeah, actually I love a good villain.



You can look at the Bond films and the ones that stick in your mind are the ones where the villains are interesting. The new film, Shatterhand, I think they're going to call it with Rami Malek is going to be the bad guy apparently and I think he's a great actor. Not a physically imposing Dave Bautista-type bad guy but someone who could beat Bond because he's smart and intelligent and cunning. Yeah, it's an important area.

James Blatch: I was just thinking about the Bond films as well as a good example of when baddies have done well it becomes the main feature of the film.

Even in the jokey Austin Powers films they created Dr. Evil who became a more layered character as you went through, with his son and his complex relationship and even in that kind of throwaway jokey environment, you layer in the character, you don't simply present this person as evil for the sake of it.

Mark Dawson: Yeah.

James Blatch: Well, that was great episode and just a reminder, you can get a fantastic PDF guide on creating the perfect villain from Sacha, if you go to [selfpublishingshow.com/villains](http://selfpublishingshow.com/villains).

Mark Dawson: Very good. Let's just round up for the sake of completeness. We've offended the old.

James Blatch: Yes, the Germans.

Mark Dawson: The Germans. If you're old and German, I'm sorry. I can only apologize. Now, we don't mean any of this. This is all light hearted, playful, fun.

James Blatch: It is. One of my excuses I put, which I think probably people will understand and support is that we don't want to get into a position of scripting this and going through editorial. It's going to be a chat.



Mark Dawson: There would be no podcast if we did that.

James Blatch: You have to forgive us from time to time when we say things that perhaps we would have said differently had we sat down and thought about it for five minutes before we opened on that.

Mark Dawson: Oh, yes. It's not bad to say something which is completely pointless and I was going to mention the London Book Fair, but that will have happened by the time this podcast goes out. We will return next week and we're actually going to do some recording at The London Book Fair.

James Blatch: Yeah, we're hoping at this stage that the next couple of episodes will be from The London Book Fair because this will go out on a Friday.

When we come back, we'll see how we get on with people. People hopefully will come along to the drinks in London.

Mark Dawson: James offended you with the drinks and I apologize.

James Blatch: I suppose I'll work towards the old people, obviously.

Then we're going to be in New York in July. We'll have some drinks there and we're going to be in Florida and Vegas at the end of the year. There will be chances to say hello to us.

I know people post in from New Zealand and Australia every time and they say when are we coming? But at some point we will make it down under and ...

Mark Dawson: You can offend them as well.

James Blatch: I can offend them. I think I have a friend the Australians at some point.





## PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Mark Dawson: But you know we do a very bad accent which I find offensive to my ears.

James Blatch: Nah, come on mate.

Mark Dawson: There we go. I was waiting for that. I chipped it up and you've fuse headed into the back of the net but you ballooned over the bar as usual.

James Blatch: Like all Manchester United who've gotten penalty in the last minute. Right, that's it I think for us. It's been a mammoth episode.

Thank you very much data Sacha and congratulations again on transitioning from a nine to five job which I think you did explain to me once was not the most exciting job in the world to getting up and working in your pajamas.

Being a writer, how brilliant is that we can celebrate Sacha's success today very proudly as part of the SPF community.

If you've got a similar story let us know because we love these moments. There are big moments in people's lives and we celebrate. That was a nice note to end on, wasn't it?

Mark Dawson: Almost made up of the damage you did earlier, yes. I will say it's goodbye from me.

James Blatch: And it's good night from him. Goodbye.

Mark Dawson: Bye.

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